

Once Upon a Time: The Use of a Fairy Tale in the Quest for Coherence

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As we read or hear the familiar phrase, “*Once upon a time...*,” if we allow ourselves, we can be transported to a threshold that can be meaningful, not only for our own prior experience, but for the journey before us, as well. If we pause, if we allow that early-echoing, still-so-evocative phrase to roll through us, it takes us to a very specific place in our own psyche that can still provide us with access to something key to our own nature, or our clients’. Along with this access, we may also find a key to our quest for coherence and a potential for healing.

There is power in the telling of a tale and how we host it in memory that I believe extends far beyond its emotional impact and into its integrative possibilities. Fairy tale or myth, and the reinforced pathways that are born of countless repetitions of a tale, can provide a potential means by which to host the quest for coherence, that state we experience subjectively as an integrated sense of self. This journey can further substantiate an already sound foundation within an individual psyche. It can also help establish a structure consistent with what is meaningful, if not yet coherent, in a more fragmented or disorganized way of experiencing.

Stories are the way we make sense out of the events of our lives. Individually and collectively, we tell stories in order to understand what has happened to us and to create meaning from those experiences.

Storytelling is fundamental to all human cultures, and our shared stories create connection to others that builds a sense of

belonging to a particular community. The story of a particular culture shapes how its members perceive the world. In this way, stories both are created by us and shape who we are. For these reasons, stories are central to both the individual and collective human experience. (Siegel & Hartzell, 2003, p. 39)

We are keepers and tellers of stories. It is my belief that even more than our opposable thumb, our capacity to share a tale may be what makes us distinct as a species. Narrative is the means by which we express our experience of inner life, our



sense of who we are, our memory and experience, and the journey we share with others. It is how we make and convey meaning. We are not merely *homo sapiens* (the ones who know), or even (as Dan Siegel says) *homo sapiens sapiens* (the ones who know we know), but also *homo narrans*, the

ones who share our tales (Roloff, Spring, 2005). The essential nature of this “storying” self is always present in who we are, both in our distress and in our delight, and by consciously utilizing this element of narrative, we can, as healers, teachers, and parents, facilitate the deepening of our innately human, integrative capacity.

In his Spring 2005 article, Dr. Lee Roloff refers to archeologist and anthropologist Alexander Marshak, who wrote of this notion of *homo narrans* in his book, *The Roots of Civilization* (1972): “Marshak was interested in the first steps in human communication, and for him, it was the insistent necessity to tell a story. He asks, “What, then is ‘story’?” Roloff further quotes Marshak:

The simplest definition is that communication of an event or process—that is happening, has happened, or will happen. There is a beginning, something happens, and there is a change or result, an understood solution; act one, act two, act three. It is in the nature of “story equation” that it must be told in terms of someone or something. There is, in fact, no other way to tell a story. (Marshak, 1972, p. 119)

of their own lives. (Siegel and Hartzell, 2003, p. 46)

In this brief conversation, I am proposing that the power of this concept of the coherent narrative has farther-reaching implications. This making sense is essential not only to the role of the parent, but of the therapist and teacher as well. It has been my experience, both personal and professional, that relationship with a story, such as a particular fairy tale, can ripple through the life of the one for whom the story, by its nature, provides an experience of a coherent narrative. Especially for those whose childhood relationships did not provide the essential elements that lead to secure attachment and its benefits, I have found that such a story can act as or provide a mirror, a map, or a container, providing a sense of holding, guidance, and a unique contribution to self-regulation.

Marshak seems to be defining something like a coherent narrative, a capacity that Dan Siegel (1999) recognizes as developing out of a child’s secure early attachment. These earliest connections not only support emerging identity, but provide the relational matrix out of which the brain is shaped and the mind is formed. It is my understanding that IPNB rose at least in part out of Dan Siegel’s curiosity about the *why* and *how* that attachment research did not address, and led at some point to this concept: one of the early surprises emerging from the field was that the parents’ integration of such a “coherent narrative” of their own life story seemed to be concurrent with, if not a causal element of, a child’s ability to develop a secure attachment with that parent. In other words, it appears that the parents’ ability to *make a meaningful story* out of the experience of their lives is connected to the very process that allows them to parent in such a way that their children are able to connect with them in a nourishing way. In *Parenting from the Inside Out*, Siegel and Mary Hartzell propose that:

As a parent, making sense of your life is important because it supports your ability to provide emotionally connecting and flexible relationships with your children. Having a coherent sense of your own life history enables you to offer the kind of experiences that help children make sense



In each case, I have wondered why a relationship with such a story has been so useful. Even before developing a better understanding of the science, it appeared that the use of a story was in some way integrative. It was not until I began my study of IPNB, however, that I began to feel as though some of the question

of *how*, and not simply *what*, might be answered as well. Siegel and Hartzell offer the following sense of some of the bilateral (right brain/left brain) integration that may occur with the use of story:

Narratives that make sense of life emerge out of a blending of the left-mode drive to explain and right-mode storage of autobiographical, social, and emotional information. A coherent narrative, one that makes sense of life experiences, may emerge from a flexible blending to the left and right modes of processing. When the left-mode drive to explain and the right-

mode nonverbal and autobiographical processing are freely integrated, a coherent narrative emerges. (Siegel and Hartzell, 2003, p. 46)

Harper and Gray use different language, but seem to be addressing something very similar, in their volume *The Therapeutic Use of Stories*.

Stories have the capacity to 'name the previously unnamed,' and to personify the content of internal psychic functioning... Through stories, fairy tales, music and other art forms, material from the unconscious can gradually be allowed to seep through to consciousness, bypassing the restrictive potential of logic and rationality. (Harper and Gray, 1997, p. 45)

These authors seem to be acknowledging what might be interpreted as the integration of a movement from implicit to explicit, and from the limits of the logical left-brain into more integrated relationship with the more holistically-oriented right. Not surprising to students of IPNB, the gifts that seem to emerge from the use of a fairy tale or myth parallel the emerging experience of an integrating mind. Dan Siegel expresses this as a *FACES* state—*flexible, adaptive, coherent, energized and stable*, and then amplifies the aspect of *COHERENCE* as *connected, open, harmonious, emergent, receptive, engaged, noetic, compassionate, and empathic*. (Siegel, Mindsight Symposium, 2005).

In the course of my years of using fairy tales and myths with my clients, I have seen such gifts emerge from making a relationship with a particular story. Whether this *once upon a time* emerges out of the client's memory, out of my particular associations to the material of what they share in the therapeutic conversations that take place in my office, or whether it emerges out of the alchemy that is the product of relational dialogue, I

have found that in each clinical case where a story was called upon in this way, it has again provided both a mirror and a map for the client's psychic landscape. Additionally, utilizing the information

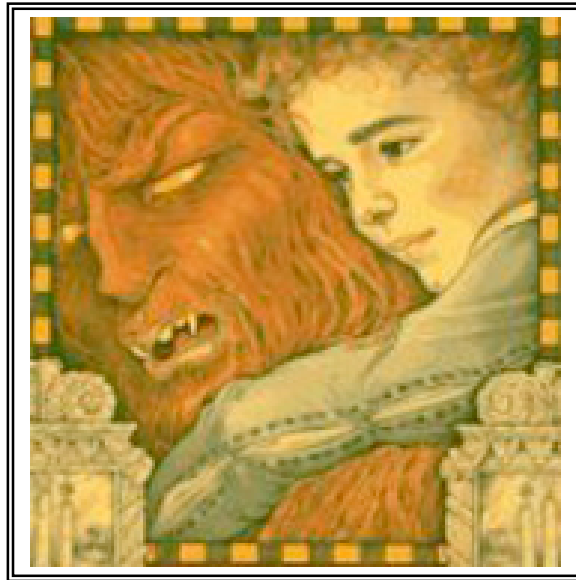
coming out of this exploration seems to unlock previously constricted libidinous energy and allow for a new generativity. It appears to be possible to actually *borrow* a coherent narrative from the structure and flow of the story itself.

One such case is T., a young man in his thirties, for whom a story of *once upon a time* has, as Harper and Gray suggest, "name[d] the previously unnamed." He has been diagnosed with both

dysthymia and ADHD, inattentive type, and certainly suffered from an ongoing and historical haunted sadness, along with his inability to focus. Worse than either the ongoing tone or difficulty with fully entering the world as a meaningful participant, T. struggles to find a sense of his own value and his right, essentially, to be alive.

Living in this distinctly toned inner world from which he has seldom emerged, T. has felt a constant and troubling distance between not only himself and others, but also from his understanding of the outer world and its rules. Adding to his sense of isolation is his observation that it is a world so many others seem so much more able to maneuver in and to understand. In my office, he says he has had what may be his first ongoing sense of contingent communication, of being tuned into by a person, and feeling for the first time that he is being more or less understood.

T.'s resonating story is "Iron John" (#136 in Grimms' collection, first written down around 1820). In his relationship with this *once upon a time* of a young man's transformation, with this story as a map and companion and guide, T. no longer feels lost. "Where, with what you are feeling, do you find yourself right now?" I once asked. I was both moved and astonished by the immediacy and the power of his response: "I am at the well, and I have failed the test, again." This



moment of acknowledgement was deeply poignant for us both, as it is T's anguish over his sense of not only *having* failures, but of *being* a failure, that has so immobilized him in the past. For years he could not bear to face consequences of his choices, or his conscience, at all.

Using this story has allowed T. to re-contextualize or reframe failure from a limiting identity, a condemning "I am," to a key element in the building of a new foundation. Even the past is changing in his mind. Previous failures are beginning to be seen as steps along an ongoing journey, elements of a landscape that extends past what he already knows, and as essential components of his quest for transformation.

Anchored in the hopefulness, coherence, and the unique details that almost magically mirror his own, T. is experiencing movement and freedom, not only from the obvious voices of despair, but from the automatic dissociation that has tended to

characterize affective moments for him in the past as well.

The story with which he resonates anchors his deeply emergent sense of self. By allowing himself to find his way through continual re-exploration of the narrative of the tale, he has laid down a pathway upon which to build the foundation for his own newly coherent sense of self. A small green tendril of new hope continues to emerge. By using this story as a bridge and a contingent relationship with a caring practitioner as a guide, this young man, this *homo narrans* is shifting in his own mind and experience from a failing simpleton to a questing, evolving, and contributive man. In the process, he is laying down new and revolutionary neural pathways for the emerging possibilities of the life before him. "*Once upon a time there was a boy. He found he was destined to become first a man of honor, and then to become a king...*"

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*His house was perfect, whether
you liked food, or sleep, or work,
or story-telling, or singing, or just
sitting and thinking, best, or a
pleasant mixture of them all.*

J. R. R. Tolkien
The Hobbit



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